# SEARCHING FOR THE PERNICIOUS ROOTS OF RACISM

"That racism had actually increased as democracy expanded and that racism had grown as science advanced": these were described as the "two great paradoxes" of history at a seminar held from 10 to 14 December 1990 in Geneva, Switzerland. The seminar was organized by the United Nations Centre for Human Rights, in accordance with a Commission resolution of 12 February 1987 on implementing the Programme of Action for the Second Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (1983-1993).

The seminar set out to study the political, historical, economic, social and cultural factors contributing to racism and racial discrimination. It arrived at a series of recommendations for action at the national and international levels to eradicate racial discrimination as well as apartheid.

The seminar drew a wide attendance, including participants from 25 Governments in their individual capacity, representatives of United Nations organs such as the Centre against Apartheid, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Department of Public Information, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Centre for Human Settlements. Also attending were representatives of specialized agencies and other intergovernmental organizations, and several non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.

Background papers prepared for the seminar by experts formed the basis of the discussions. The papers, however, and the comments made on them expressed the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of their Governments or the institutions with which they are affiliated.

## RACISM, THE MANY-HEADED MONSTER

### . . . *Historically Speaking*

Early patterns of prejudice linked to colour reveal the existence of race thinking long before the emergence of modern racism, noted Mr. Paul Gordon Lauren (United States), the author of the paper "The Heavy Burden of the Past: Historial Factors Contributing to Racism, Racial Discrimination and Apartheid". In his view, the nature of the problem was not only historical but also global, and no inhabited continent escaped its scourge. Different expressions of early racism were found in colonial conquest, the search for captives for slavery, imposition of racial segregation and later apartheid, creation of racial ideologies, imposition of racial exclusionary laws and imperialism. He also pointed out that the reason for slavery was not only racial but economic.

Commenting on the paper, some participants opposed what they considered a narrow concept of racial discrimination based solely on skin colour, since it had often been perpetrated on other grounds, such as discrimination against ethnic or religious minorities. White-white, black-black or yellow-yellow racial clashes were not isolated phenomena in mankind's history, it was stated. The view was expressed that in seeking to justify slavery, its proponents developed the idea of the supposed superiority of one race over another. Others argued that religion had been a dominant phenomenon, sometimes more powerful than economic circumstances, and that such doctrine had often been used for racial or other motives.

Among other historical situations which have contributed to racism and racial discrimination, mention was made of the centuries-long conflict between Christianity and Islam; of the many negative legacies of imperial policies; of the rise of ideologies of exclusion in many countries and the legalization of second-class citizenship; of the pogroms, lynchings and killings culminating in Europe in the Nazi extermination camps; and of discrimination against immigrants, migrant workers and minorities.

### . . . *Politically Speaking*

The primary causes of racism, be they economic, political or whatever, are embedded in the past. Their legacies, when they lend themselves to abuse in the civil and political sphere, trigger further

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waves and outbursts of racism. This is a central point made in the paper by Mr. Henry Sekyi (Ghana) entitled ''Causes of and current manifestations of racism: Political factors contributing to racism and racial discrimination''. The fundamental remedy he advocated was to identify, attack and destroy or neutralize all such legacies.

Among the factors mentioned as contributing to the problem were the failure to respect, or the neglect of, international instruments and recommendations of the United Nations—South Africa's apartheid policy being a case in point. Others were the role of certain extremist political parties in supporting and encouraging racist regimes and in promoting racial prejudices; racial myths and stereotypes reinforced by selective teaching of history; and the legacies of colonialism.

Many participants emphasized the important role and potential of the mass media in the eradication of racism and discrimination, and most speakers agreed on the predominant role of education. It was also noted that universal adherence to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was an essential factor in the efforts of the international community aimed at combating and eradicating racism and racial discrimination.

### . . . Economically Speaking

Everyday experience gained from living in part of a country that was converting from a centrally planned to a free-market economy provided a first-hand understanding of how economic factors could contribute to a rise in racism and in social fears. This was a point made by Ms. Tatjana Ansbach (Germany), whose paper, ''Economic factors contributing to racism and racial disrimination'', noted an alarming rise in brutal criminal acts against aliens who looked ''different''.

The expert examined racism and economic interests, as well as the responsibilities of States to influence economic processes with the aim of combating racism. She argued that racist theories and behaviour were for the benefit of economic interests. She contended that the way labour is organized may itself be discriminatory, especially if this was rooted and protected by law, such as in South Africa. Bilateral treaties which provide for some degree of protection for foreign workers today may lose their validity tomorrow as political climates change. The expert agreed that fear of punishment, or punishment itself, was not an effective way to combat racism.

As one participant noted, laws to protect people can be created, but the reality often differs. The view was also expressed that a distinction should be made between the position of migrants and that of indigenous peoples or minorities, who tend not to participate in the economic system and have often had their economic base destroyed by the interests of the modern State. There was consensus that immigration *per se* did not increase racism, although by causing a higher unemployment rate it can create a climate for racism. Due consideration should be paid to the fact that in dealing with human rights, one cannot forget about the structural causes of their non-realization, while economic policies also have certain human rights implications.

### . . . Socially and Culturally Speaking

Racism plays on the ambiguity of society; dominant political and cultural groups deny the cultures of minority groups or try to assimilate them, according to Mrs. Purificacion Quisumbing (Philippines), who prepared a background paper on the ''Social and cultural factors contributing to racism and racial discrimination''. Apartheid is the extreme manifestation of racism and racial discrimination, she said, pointing out that a symposium in Athens of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1981 had concluded that the concept of racism had no scientific basis whatsoever. Moreover, racism is not inborn; it is learned from the surroundings.

Among the recommendations she formulated were proposals that: educational campaigns and other activities in the communications field should be continued; United Nations bodies could include

anti-racist components in their programmes; recourse procedures should be redefined and popularized; and United Nations human rights bodies should be decentralized and more focused on regional approaches.

Most participants agreed with her recommendation on the need for more effort to be placed on education, and many again stressed the role that the media should play in disseminating information against racism. Some felt that the media represented public opinion; others, that it formed public opinion. In some countries, for example, the press helped to give a more positive image of other cultures.

It was felt that existing human rights bodies should cooperate and coordinate better. The view was expressed that monitoring bodies at the national level were not effective. It was suggested that while official but independent bodies to investigate racism already existed, it might be more useful to approach the subject from the level of everyday life. The paper emphasized that only at the grass-roots level could racism be eradicated.

The representative of the International Labour Organisation made a statement detailing the organization's activities to combat racism. The adoption of labour standards, especially those relating to migrant workers, indigenous populations and minorities, was one example. Another: each year a report is published on action against apartheid, including information on recent developments in the labour and social systems.

## RACISM CONTINUES TO REAR ITS UGLY HEAD

In a background paper by Asbjorn Eide (Norway), entitled "Racism and racial discrimination: Historical features and contemporary manifestations", the author focused on the evolution and demise of the mythology of race in pseudo-scientific discourse. He also outlined specific manifestations of racism and discrimination seen to be race-related, and touched on the history of efforts to outlaw racism and racial discrimination in international law.

Participants stressed that in combating racism and racial discrimination, priority attention should be given to the struggle against apartheid. There was scepticism about what some called the rhetoric of the new leadership of the National Party, and the view was expressed that only wider and more intensely applied sanctions could demolish apartheid.

Comments were made on the racist legislation and practices which formed the basis of the apartheid system. As long as apartheid continued, the achievements of societies all over the world in guaranteeing human rights and equality through law would be endangered and no group would be free from the spectre of subjugation to similar systems.

Even as colonialism was on the decline, some of its inherited tendencies were beginning to be manifested, such as ethnic nationalism and the desire for greater autonomy, self-determination and independence, and conflicts between ethnic groups and other entities. Another speaker held that indirect forms of colonialism could be witnessed today—which manifested themselves in expansionist policies of States, occupation of foreign lands, expulsion, and uprooting and segregation of populations on grounds of alleged threats to national security.

Besides the "established" ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, reference was made to "new" groups who became victims of racist policies and discrimination, such as migrant workers. It was pointed out that the United Nations had made significant progress in defining the rights of particular groups, such as migrant workers and indigenous populations. It was observed that international law on indigenous peoples until very recently had favoured the concept of integration. Recently, a new concept of the preservation of cultural identity had emerged, and States had now to decide individually which of those approaches should be taken. Mention was also made of refugees as a particular category of victims of racism.

One participant pointed out that the minorities-related issues were among the most acute problems of the newly democratized States



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in Central and Eastern Europe. In his opinion, animosity towards foreign workers was due to the fact that both sides lacked proper preparation and information on the history, traditions and cultural values of the other. Many others noted that the present expansion of democracy has often been accompanied by outbreaks of racial violence and intolerance; with the return of democracy and freedom of expression nationalistic feelings had re-emerged and superiority complexes were openly manifested.

One speaker stressed the need to develop a legal culture, noting that if the general public did not have a feeling for rights and duties laid down in the legislation, then the law would not have an impact. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the law had to declare discrimination illegal and legal norms had to be enforced.

The view was expressed that non-discrimination and equal opportunity, if taken together, could bring about progress in eliminating racial discrimination and the stereotypes underlying it. Each situation must be studied carefully to determine how the actual position of specific disadvantaged groups might be the object of affirmative action or programmes. Another believed that affirmative action, if not applied with due care and a fine balancing of interests of the various sections of society, could produce social tension. Information, communication and education were in his view important tools which could be used with regard to this kind of action.

The view was repeatedly confirmed that education was certainly one of the keys to a world free from racism and to a climate of mutual tolerance and understanding. Sensitivity training in the early school years and broadly based community action programmes were described as important tools to achieve this objective. Not only formal but also informal education should receive highest attention. The role of the media in general and the problem of regulating the electronic and printed media in particular were given some consideration. The potential of television in shaping attitudes of children was mentioned, as well as the importance of their early socialization.

Other views concerned holding future human rights seminars as close as possible to regions where racial or ethnic tension was evident; establishment of a post of high commissioner for racial discrimination; and establishment of national ombudsmen in the field of racial discrimination.

It was concluded that the core of the problem was in the assumption of superiority or inferiority which existed subconsciously in people. It could erupt in the context of various kinds of tension, competition for resources, unemployment and other difficulties. Distinctions based on race, colour, descent or national origin could take many different forms in complex situations, each with its own particular political, historical, economic, social and cultural context.

## ROOTING OUT THE EVIL

Among the conclusions and recommendations adopted by the seminar on its final day, 14 December, were the following:

- Consideration should be given to proclaiming a third Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination to begin in 1993.
- Governments should continue to give high priority to strengthening legal and political action against racism and discrimination, through administrative and other measures and by creating legal sanctions for racist offences, and should promote tolerance, mutural understanding and friendship among racial or ethnic groups. They could establish institutions such as commissions or ombudsmen to deal with charges of racism.
- The international community should intensify its efforts to provide increased effective and practical assistance to the victims of racism, racial discrimination and apartheid and to those struggling against these evils.
- While welcoming the progress made in southern Africa towards establishing an atmosphere conducive to negotiations, the seminar considered that the struggle against apartheid should continue to be accorded highest priority.
- A study should be conducted on the practice of institutionalized racism to make the interna-

tional community more aware of it, and concerted international action should be taken to prevent States from sliding into racial conflict and confrontation, or from allowing racism in some other garb to be consolidated.

▶ The importance of education, teaching and training were underlined. Closer cooperation should be established between UNESCO, the Centre for Human Rights and CERD to develop new approaches in this area. It is also desirable to go beyond formal education to address also the factors which shape the early socialization of children in order to foster attitudes of equality and non-discrimination.

▶ Special attention should be given to other manifestations of discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, culture and religion, including new trends of racial discrimination, intolerance and xenophobia, and to situations based on fear and rejection of those who are different.

▶ The seminar asked Governments to study the disproportionate rate of imprisonment and conviction of members of a particular race or ethnic group and take remedial action. The training of law enforcement officials with regard to awareness of the social and psychological situations of disadvantaged groups, respect for human rights and impartiality and non-discrimination was also stressed.

▶ The importance of the United Nations conventions against racial discrimination was underlined and States which have not ratified them were encouraged to do so.

▶ The activities of CERD should receive more support and more time should be allowed for its deliberations. Ways to fund the Committee under the United Nations regular budget should be sought. On the other hand, States parties should comply more fully with their reporting duties.

▶ There should be greater decentralization of United Nations human rights procedures and activities with a view to enhancing universal awareness and compliance with international human rights obligations. Meetings of United Nations human rights bodies should be held, from time to time, in regions or subregions.

▶ Noting the important role of the mass media, particularly television, in combating racism and racial discrimination, the seminar recommended that a seminar be held to study that aspect.

▶ The 1976 study on racial discrimination prepared by a special rapporteur for the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities should be updated, with the focus on assessing achievements in eliminating discrimination. UNESCO should be encouraged to initiate other expert studies on specific historical and contemporary factors leading to discrimination.

▶ The Secretary-General should increase his efforts to develop model laws and to prepare a handbook of resource procedures for victims of racial discrimination.

▶ High priority should be given to completing work on the draft declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities and on the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples.

▶ In implementing the Programme of Action for the Second Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, the coordination functions of the Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights should be strengthened, more resources should be made available, there should be greater coordination among United Nations organs and agencies involved, contacts should be improved with regional and non-governmental organizations, and exchanges of information and views among national human rights institutions should be promoted and facilitated.

▶ Economic disparity and deprivation are major causes of overt discrimination. Economic policies should take into account the need for balanced development. International economic cooperation should be strengthened to give additional financial resources and adequate technology to developing countries, especially in Africa.

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